

## The Many Meanings of Bear

On our mission trip this year, we expect to see a bear or two in the mountains of southwest Virginia. In fact, where we will be building a handicapped ramp, our host showed us bear tracks and told us that they were regular visitors in that place.

When we begin to think about the many meanings of the word bear, we might find some insight, some humility, as we seek God's direction in how to deal with them. Bear with me as we search and seek.

In Galatians, Paul the apostle writes to the people of the church of the same name that they should bear each other's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. This is both a chance for a ministry and a time to see the true meaning of God's love for today's Christians.

In the church, we learn, sooner or later, that being the family of God means that we never have to face things by ourselves. Whether it is a catastrophic illness or a miracle of the highest blessing, we walk together and bear one another's burdens.

Sometimes the burdens are light, sometimes heavy. But the community lifting of a load makes everything easier and leaves room for God's Holy Spirit to work among us.

It is sometimes hard to let others share that burden along with us. But allowing that, experiencing that, is a chance to see what God can really do!

*Two men are walking through a forest. Suddenly, they see a bear in the distance, running towards them. They turn and start running away. But then one of them stops, takes some running shoes from his bag, and starts putting them on.*

*"What are you doing?" says the other man. "Do you think you will run faster than the bear with those?"*

*"I don't have to run faster than the bear," he says. "I just have to run faster than you."*

What a funny moment, but a great picture of how not to live as a Christian. The Christian would protect the friend, indeed ultimately sacrifice his life for the other if need be. That is what we work toward as Christians. Putting others ahead of ourselves as we walk together with Jesus.

Bearing fruit is another joy to which God calls us. Watching the apple and peach trees as the fruit comes forth yet once again each spring is a wonder and blessing. But sharing the gospel with others so that they can know Jesus as well is the kind of bearing fruit to which God calls us all.

What a joy to know that something God said through us yielded eternal life and a changed life on earth for someone else. Jesus gives us life so that it can be shared with others. Keeping it for ourselves will only limit what God can do through us.

Henri Nouwen, a dedicated teacher and missionary, wrote this prayer that we would all do well to lift up every day.

*Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and the life to come.*

Sometimes we think there is only one solution to each situation we face. But there are many, and a classic joke about bears can teach us much.

*Roderick is rambling in the woods one day when a bear chases him up a really tall tree. The bear starts to climb the tree, so Roderick climbs up higher. Then, the bear climbs down and goes away.*

*Again, the Roderick starts to climb down the tree. Suddenly, the bear returns, and this time he's brought an even bigger bear with him. The two bears climb up the tree, the bigger bear going higher than the first. Rod climbs even higher still, so that the bears can't reach him. Eventually, the bears go away.*

*Naturally quite relieved, Roderick starts down the tree again. Suddenly, the two bears return, this time Rod knows he is in big trouble, as each bear is carrying a beaver.*

So the next time you see a bear, or see a news story involving a bear, remember that God gives us many options for the tasks we are about. Sometimes we just need to back up, pray a little, consult with a friend in Christ, and bark up another tree.

Jesus said, as we return the many meanings of bear, that if we want to follow him, we should take up our crosses and follow him. This is the ministry of cross-bearing. Not just carrying a load that we have been dealt, but bearing it in a creative way that brings blessing to others and honor to God.

Bear the cross of Christ, which is all of what we have as Christians, the good and the bad, so that we bear witness to the gospel of new life in Jesus Christ. And the bears will be a blessing, not something to fear!